

An Insider's History of the Dead, Both Serious and Profane

By BEN RATLIFF

The first lines of "A Long Strange Trip" do not bode well. "Shortly before every Grateful Dead concert, there is a luminous, suspended moment," Dennis McNally writes. "Bathed in the subliminal hum of the stage's electric potential, you smell the ozone of 133,000 burning watts and realize that the elegantly arranged castle of equipment around you is alive — not just stuff, but a sentient alchemical sculpture."

This ponderous beginning can't be taken seriously, not only because the "luminous moment" occurs before practically every large rock 'n' roll show but also because the passage so typifies the cosmic blab that has wafted around the Grateful Dead for 35 years.

Yet right after that opening comes a well-written prose diagram of the Dead's equipment and sound system, visually moving the reader around the stage with the kind of authoritative precision one obtains only from knowing the soundman and being a good writer.

Mr. McNally was the Grateful Dead's publicist from 1984 to 1995, and in 1981 was selected by Jerry Garcia to write the authorized biography of the band. His book, in which he appears now and then as Scrib (his road nickname), indicates that he had more access to his subjects and their trails of paper, recording tape and roach clips than almost all

A memorable band that appeared to flourish on self-contradiction.

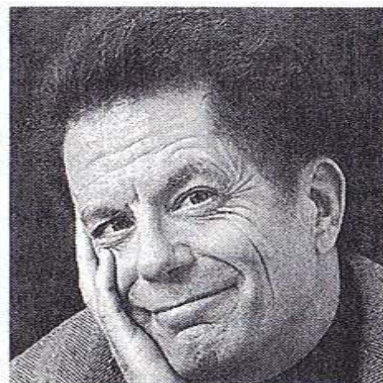
previous rock biographers.

It makes sense that the band would be generous to him; giving things away was part of the group's ethic. But it also makes sense that Mr. McNally would end up misty-eyed about the Dead both as individuals and as a set of values.

And so "A Long Strange Trip" pivots back and forth between offering the reader evenhanded analysis and a stoner bearhug. One begins to appreciate Mr. McNally's dilemma: how do you write a serious book that posits a rock band as a major force of modern American culture, and still work in bad-boy winks about getting high in front of the cops?

The first half of this hefty book — which takes the story through 1969 — stays engrossing while it describes the Dead as part of the creative social circus in San Francisco. The cast includes the writer Ken Kesey and his Merry Pranksters; the LSD chemist Owsley Stanley; the social activists and happening-actors known as the Diggers; the San Francisco Mime Troupe; the bluegrass revivalists who made up Jerry Garcia's early milieu; Steve Reich and other modern-composition intellectuals who were early consorts of the future Dead bassist Phil Lesh; and the rest of the San Francisco rock scene once it had started in earnest by 1966.

In those early years, the members of the Dead are raffish, walking insults to the legal system; as individual musicians they are self-conscious yet raw as a group. But they decide to combine their predilections



Susana Millman/Broadway Books

A LONG STRANGE TRIP The Inside History of the Grateful Dead

By Dennis McNally

Illustrated. 684 pages. Broadway Books. \$30.

for blues, folk songs, jug-band music, bluegrass and rock 'n' roll. By 1969, with the album "Live Dead," they reached their first pinnacle; but they were still working it all out, improvising their lives day by day.

Starting in 1970, however, they aren't just a part of the wheel: they are the wheel. Here the initial, sweet phase of psychedelic rock ends. San Francisco becomes engulfed in hungry, desperate teenagers; the album "Workingman's Dead" becomes a hit; and the band becomes commercially successful, touring constantly with the help of a few powerful promoters. The reader begins to bump into six-figure concert fees and horse ranches.

With a style and a sound that was finally battered down, and the occasionally startling highs of Garcia's improvisations, the band revealed its organic purpose in every album, in every live show.

Fans joined the Dead's caravan for the social experiment that it was, not for any social experiment that it

contributed to, and things stayed roughly the same until the death of Garcia in 1995. Garcia, toward the end, didn't represent the notion of freedom very dashing; he was wobbling with typical indecision among several romantic relationships, dealing with diabetes and heart disease and spending a lot of time playing computer games.

Writing his chronological history salted with interlude chapters on aspects of the Dead's world, Mr. McNally manages to point toward some large themes. The best of them is the idea that the band and its members sustained themselves through self-contradiction. Garcia was "the leader who wouldn't lead," a voluble, self-taught intellectual and philosopher-king who remained the focal point yet somehow wriggled away whenever put into a position of responsibility.

Especially before 1970, the band casually allied itself with radical political causes, yet Garcia cast his last vote for Lyndon Johnson in 1964, and the other band members weren't much more politically active. Although full of aggressive egos — those of Mr. Lesh and the drummer Mickey Hart seem especially hot and oversize — the band found its own balance.

There is remarkable and well-researched material here, yet Mr. McNally is often tempted to put grander frames on it. "There is no Grateful Dead philosophy," Mr. McNally writes in his closing pages, "but if there were, a central tenet would be Jung's concept of synchronicity." While swallowing this, it helps to know that Garcia had read Jung. But sometimes music is just music. What more claim do the Dead have to embodying synchronicity than, say, the 20 best jazz groups working today? Nevertheless, "A Long Strange Trip" is the most comprehensive and readable book yet on a large, floppy, fuzzy-edged subject.

The Modern New Menu

This month some of the Museum of Modern Art only be in a former factory in Queens, but in one of that verdant outdoor spaces won't be just any lawn or grassy expanse that is a self: Socrates Sculpture Park in Long Island City.

Beginning tomorrow, it will be the setting for Evening Picture Show: An Outdoor Film Festival. The museum's screenings of stellar films are appropriately starry local.

"There were no real film outdoors for families," says Beth Margulies, the museum's programs coordinator. Films are child-appropriately for all ages."

The festival will start with a program appealing to all tastes: my Tempters: Food Film from "Bread," about the forms of that basic delight "Night Kitchen," an adaptation of Maurice Sendak's picture of a boy's culinary dream.

Also on the menu are "Eat," which Ms. Margulies has scribed as "a black-and-white of a bad instructional film," "Zea," a close-up of a fan cooking.

The seven films are part of you might call a multicourse. Each evening will also include music (tomorrow's band Knuckle Sandwich) and a party to explore the park's with the help of program workshop with an artist. It also encourages families to picnic or buy one from vendors that will offer their

"Our intention is to have a fashioned picture show with special things thrown in."

Evenings at the Picture Show
Tuesdays through Sept. 28

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